SUMMER Safety Notes on...

Poison Plants

Poison Oak

In the West, this plant may grow as a vine but usually is a shrub (pictured). In the East, it grows as a shrub. It has three leaflets to form its leaves.

Poison Ivy

Grows as a vine in the East, Midwest and South, it grows as a vine. In the far Northern and Western United States, Canada and around the Great Lakes, it grows as a shrub. Each leaf has three leaflets.

Poison Sumac

Grows in standing water in peat bogs in the Northeast and Midwest and in swampy areas in parts of the Southeast. Each leaf has seven to 13 leaflets.

A Poison Plant Rash

Poison Plant rash is an allergic contact dermatitis caused by contact with oil called urushiol. It is colorless or pale yellow oil that oozes from any cut or crushed part of the plant, including the roots, stems, and leaves. Contact with urushiol can occur in three ways:

Direct contact — touching the sap of the toxic plant.

Indirect contact — touching something on which urushiol is present. The oil can stick to the fur of animals, to garden tools or sports equipment, or to any objects that have come into contact with it.

Airborne contact — burning poison plants put urushiol particles into the air.

A reaction appears usually within 12 to 48 hours. There is severe itching, redness, and swelling, followed by blisters. The rash is often arranged in streaks or lines where the person brushed against the plant. In a few days, the blisters become crusted and take 10 days or longer to heal.

Poison plant dermatitis can affect almost any part of the body. <u>The rash does not spread by touching it</u>, although it may seem to when it breaks out in new areas. This may happen because urushiol absorbs more slowly into skin that is thicker such as on the forearms, legs, and trunk.

Recognizing Poison Plants

Identifying the poison ivy plant is the first step in avoiding the rash. The popular saying ***<u>"leaves of three, beware of me"</u>*** is a good rule of thumb for poison ivy and poison oak but is only partly correct.

Poison ivy has different forms. It grows as vines or low shrubs. Poison oak, with its oak-like leaves, is a low shrub in the East and can be a low or high shrub in the West. Poison sumac is a tall shrub or small tree. The plants also differ in where they grow. Poison ivy grows in fertile, well-drained soil. Western poison oak needs a great deal of water, and Eastern poison oak prefers sandy soil but sometimes grows near lakes. Poison sumac tends to grow in standing water, such as peat bogs.

These plants are common in the spring and summer. When they grow, there is plenty of sap and the plants bruise easily. The leaves may have black marks where they have been injured. Although poison ivy rash is usually a summer complaint, cases may occur in winter when people are cleaning their yards and burning wood with urushiol on it, or when cutting poison ivy vines to make wreaths.

It is important to recognize these toxic plants in all seasons. In the early fall, the leaves can turn colors such as yellow or red when other plants are still green. The berry-like fruit on the mature female plants also changes color in fall, from green to off-white. In the winter, the plants lose their leaves. In the spring, poison ivy has yellow-green flowers.

If you think you've brushed with poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac, follow these simple steps:

1. Wash all exposed areas with cold running water as soon as you can reach a stream,